

## America's wild 'World War III' plan for Iran, and Israel's part in it

**The Pentagon's top strategists, in concert with their Israeli peers, prepared for an almost apocalyptic war in Iran in the 1980s, to counter a Soviet invasion. So why have those plans just been declassified – and published?**

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It may sound fantastic now, and was probably not really feasible even then.

But according to the Pentagon's own Joint Chiefs of Staff, sometime in the mid-1980's, American military planners wanted Israel to take part in a war which would start in Iran and spread to the Eastern Mediterranean, where the Israel Air Force would be tasked with striking Soviet ships and other military units.

This comes not from some scoop-seeking scholar, but from the horse's mouth. David B. Crist, the Joint Chiefs' Senior Historian specializing in Iran and its 43-year conflict with eight U.S. administrations, is a Reserve Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel, with combat deployments in the Middle East and Special Forces background.

He has been privy to secret contingency plans, has observed Iran's activities in the Gulf and beyond and appears to be IDF-friendly, having being associated with the pro-Israel Washington Institute.

Recently, Crist uploaded to the Joint Chiefs website an unusual, even dramatic presentation with an understated title: "U.S. Central Command Campaign Planning Against The Soviet Union, 1979-87." It was originally shown to the current Commanding General of CENTCOM, Frank McKenzie, a fellow Marine, and his officers.

Military history centers are not academically oriented, though they aim to offer the most thorough research. Their mission is to provide today's cadre with case studies of past events, in order to distill relevant lessons for immediate and future use in either the same places or in similar dimensions of warfare. And this presentation is no exception. It offers a window into U.S. military strategic thinking about taking on Iran today – and what Israel's role would be in such an operation.

These days, it is quite routine for the Israeli Navy to practice interoperability with the U.S.'s Bahrain-based Fifth Fleet and for the IDF to train with U.S. fighter squadrons in exercises such as last week's Desert Falcon, as part of its military relationship with the U.S.'s CENTCOM, which watches

over the Gulf. But this was not the case in the last quarter-century before the millennium, and it was definitely not imagined by most to be a partnership pointed against Russia.

Defense collaboration (rather than simply assistance) between the Pentagon and Tel Aviv's Kirya defense HQ began following the Yom Kippur War, picked up steam after the Camp David accords - when Egypt, too, joined the American orbit – and took off momentarily under President Ronald Reagan, with Defense Minister Ariel Sharon signed a strategic cooperation agreement with Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger.

This unprecedented document reflected a tug of war between Washington, wishing to paint its relationship with Israel as anti-Soviet rather than anti-Arab, and Jerusalem, with an opposite policy, fearful of alienating Moscow.

This agreement was almost immediately cancelled when Israel annexed the Golan Heights. It was revived and upgraded when Yitzhak Shamir, as prime minister, and Moshe Arens, as foreign minister, replaced Menachem Begin and Sharon.

Washington welcomed them, along with Ehud Barak, then head of military intelligence, and his planning colleague Menachem Einan, for a re-launch of talks and the setting up of mechanisms, protocols and joint projects, including the rare provision of pre-positioning sites for U.S. munitions in Israel for immediate availability in case of emergency. There were apparently at least six such sites, numbered 51-56, with 54 described as a 500-bed hospital for war casualties.

Reading Crist's account, it now turns out that some key American officials, most prominently Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Armitage, had creative ideas for taking the renewed partnership to the next level.

Armitage, Colin Powell's closest friend and later Deputy Secretary of State, forged a warm bond with Barak and Major General Uri Simhoni, the Defense Attache (who passed away last month, several weeks after their buddy, Powell). And there was a specific mission that would confirm their collaboration.

The Soviets were always suspected of harboring a plot to invade Iran, perhaps with help from the inside by the Communist-leaning Tudeh party. But following the Soviet incursion into neighboring Afghanistan, and Khomeini's taking power in Tehran, vowing to export the Islamic revolution, the old scenario was refreshed.

Now, the Soviets' motive would be to prevent the spread of Khomeinism to the USSR's Muslim republics and Afghanistan, and to stop "the

fragmentation of the Iranian state caused by internal strife or defeat" in the (1980-88) Iran-Iraq War. The Soviets' interest in some form of control over Iran sprang from two core reasons: The first, irridentist/territorial, wanting to swallow up northern Iran into then-Soviet controlled Azerbaijan, and the second strategic: To have Persian Gulf bases for their fleet.

The "Large-Scale Soviet Invasion Plan" Crist found in the files showed arrows drawn south from Armenia and the Caspian Sea towards the capital, Tehran – indicating the large-scale movement of Soviet military forces – and then on to Isfahan, Khuzestan and Bandar Abbas, on the Gulf, with the invading forces drawn from a pool of "24-29 Mechanized or Armor Divisions, one Airborne Division and 700-1000 strike aircraft."

U.S. counter-strategy, according to Col. Crist, was "to deter the Soviets from invasion" by owning the capacity "to deploy and sustain a credible force to the region, with the clear indication that a Soviet attack on a vital American interest would mean war with the United States. If a conflict begins, be prepared to attack and defeat any Soviet effort to control the oil of the Middle East."

Also, and this is where Israel comes in, the U.S. would aim to "widen the conflict beyond just the Middle East to other areas where the U.S. and our allies hold military advantage." The documents quoted are from Defense Secretary Weinberger to Joint Chiefs' Chairman David Jones, an Air Force general, and vice versa.

This sounds like the script for a limited version of World War III, with nuclear weapons included. If the plan didn't call for Strategic Air Command strikes inside the Soviet Union, it did foresee at least tactical nuclear strikes on the USSR and Iran, shelling, mine-laying mines and "demolition packs" – explosive charge carried on an infantryman's back, saboteur-style, but in this case containing a nuclear charge.

The "1004" plan proposed a so-called "Horizontal Escalation," escalating geographically and sandwiching Iran from the north and south, whereby American forces would operate from Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt and a Saudi jumpboard into Iran.

The plan also envisages an intensive sabotage campaign, led by U.S. Special Forces working with the CIA, who would embrace "unconventional warfare to develop a resistance movement disrupting Soviet forces by blowing bridges and attacking their rear areas."

A further layer of U.S. allied militaries, from moderate, pro-Western countries in the region, would "operate against Soviet client states, especially those with historic animosity" towards the U.S., such as Syria.

This, specifies Crist's documents, "would include Israel, who would insure the safety of the Suez Canal by striking Soviet forces in the Eastern Mediterranean."

While Israel was earlier drawn into dogfights with Soviet fighters over Egypt and struck transports bringing equipment to Syria, its leaders from Ben-Gurion to Eshkol and Golda to Dayan always commented that they had no illusions regarding the IDF's ability to withstand a Soviet onslaught. But the American planners let their imagination run wild, and it had its uses for their Israeli counterparts.

"We went along with the simulation," recalled an Israeli defense official who held a central role then, "because it helped foster a closer relationship with our professional opposite numbers, who up until that time were more reserved.

"Indeed, we looked at options stemming from superpower conflict around Syria or Cyprus, with the possibility of our being drawn in and clashing with Soviet air or naval units. It was a modular, multi-part scenario, potentially based around Iran as a flashpoint, but with other narratives as well. As is customary with military organizations, it is not a plan, per se, that is important, as it would inevitably have to adapt to circumstances, but it was an exercise in the practice of planning, in this case together," Israelis and Americans.

This was the seed of what has by now blossomed into a forest. The Soviet Union disintegrated shortly thereafter, but Russia is back in force in Syria and Iran is a perennial headache, so while the plan unearthed by the Joint Chiefs' historian was never put to a test, it is certainly too early to consign it to a museum display.

The Pentagon's decision to give Crist's seemingly confidential briefing wider distribution may also be a message of its own. It could be intended to orient more U.S. officers towards the considerations and constraints involved in a potential war against Iran, with Israel's participation, or without it. In the report's own words, "[T]he geography has not changed. Any Iranian-centric conflict will confront the U.S. with similar challenges."

Conspiratorial minds will also see it as a signal aimed directly at Tehran, translating mere saber-rattling rhetoric into concrete combat schemes, complete with assigned units and projected timelines.

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